



This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Lou Milam award program, which was established in memory of a longtime INL employee who dreamed of earning a college degree but died of cancer before she had the chance.

Women earn degrees with help of award, inspiration from its namesake

By Kortny Rolston, *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

Over the past 20 years, winners of the Lou Milam education award have used the money to buy laptops, gas or child care while they worked, raised families and pursued college degrees. But for the 50 recipients — all current or former female employees at Idaho National Laboratory and the Idaho Cleanup Project — the award means much more than money. It's the encouragement many need to finish their college degrees no matter how long it may take or how tough.

"You look at the history of this award and the women who've come before you and it inspires you," said Shannon Wilson, an INL employee who won a Lou Milam Next Step Education Award in 2011. "I am not going to let them down. I am not going to let Lou down."

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the award program, which was established in memory of Lou Milam, a longtime INL employee who dreamed of earning a college degree.

Lou's husband, Stuart, set up the fund in 1992 not long after she died of cancer. The fund pays for at least one scholarship (it started at \$500 and is now \$1,500). In addition, the contractors that operate INL and ICP fund scholarships.

The result is that 50 women — many of whom started as administrative assistants or nonexempt employees like Lou did — have earned college degrees or certifications that have helped advance their careers. The group includes one Ph.D., one juris doctorate, nine master's degrees, 38 bachelor's degrees, two associates degrees, two specialty certifications and one fellowship.



Lou Milam award winners pose with Stuart Milam ([click here for larger image](#)). award.

"Lou knew how hard it was for women who were working and raising families to go to college and get a degree," said Sheila Theobald-James, a selection committee member and friend of Lou's. "She planned to get a college degree but didn't get the chance to fulfill her dream."

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Who was Lou?

Lou Milam started her career at the then-Idaho National Engineering Laboratory shortly before her 20th birthday. She started as an administrative support professional and was promoted throughout her 25-year career at the lab. She eventually was named Women's Programs coordinator in the lab's Equal Employment Opportunity office.

Milam resigned from her position in 1990 to accompany her husband, Stuart, to Vienna, Austria, where he worked for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). They returned to the United States in 1991 and settled in Albuquerque, N.M. A few months after moving to New Mexico, she was diagnosed with cancer and died at the age of 45.

In addition, four recipients currently are earning graduate degrees and six are pursuing bachelor's degrees.

Trudy Overlin, an INL employee and the first Lou Milam winner, said what sets the award apart is that it can be used to cover a variety of expenses — from child care to gas money.

Women who are raising families, working and going to school often face different challenges than traditional students and the award is designed to address that, she said.

"Most scholarships or awards require that the money be used for fees, tuition or books," Overlin said. "This award can be used for any expense."

The Next-Step Education Awards are given out each year during an emotional ceremony that Stuart Milam, family, friends and past winners attend. Recipients are required to complete an application and submit an essay about what getting an education means to them.

The selection committee is composed of both past winners, the INL education department and human resources staff who review applications for women that embody the spirit of the Lou Milam

This year's winners

This year's Lou Milam Next Step Education Award recipients are: Kathryn Nii and Wendy Wilson from Idaho National Laboratory and Jenni Ackerman from the Idaho Cleanup Project.